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DANTE AND HIS ENGLISH READERS

BY RUTH SHEPARD PHELPS

THE numberless voices lifted in the late anniversary year to say something about Dante did not quite all chant in unison. It was not quite all a hymn of praise. And perhaps it was as well that there should be a few notes of discord and challenge to force us not to take Dante entirely for granted, but to pause now and then to give reasons for the long study and the great love which keep us searching through his volumes. A critic in one of the current periodicals keeps telling us "with clucking voice" why Dante cannot be expected to please the modern English reader; that the modern English reader does not like allegory, does not like the allusive, indirect style which describes by means of astronomical or mythological charades; does not like antiquated learning, nor supernaturalism, nor the constant need for a hand-book to history.

The shortest retort to this array of reasons would be to deny that they make any difference. It is the simple fact that the modern English reader does enjoy Dante, that every year new ones undergo the old deep fascination, that any soul capable of the enjoyment of great poetry need only trust himself wholly to the *alto passo* to find his reward. It is evident that those drawbacks are not fatal, and it is more interesting to understand this than to refuse to see that it is true.

The allegory we can perhaps enjoy, along with the astronomical riddles, with that part of our intelligence which is attracted by the solution of puzzles. The pedantry covers some of the loveliest of Dante's poetry, if we are patient and interested enough to look beneath, for if he calls the moon by the erudite name of old Tithonous's concubine, it is only so as to make us see her as a pale and gracious lady looking forth, like a Blessed Damozel, from her balcony in Heaven. Those supernatural elements so uncongenial to the modern temper are after all not

more shocking in a supernatural world than fairies in fairyland, and we are conciliated, moreover, at finding that that world is always described in terms of this, and that its denizens are human creatures who keep their appetite for news of earth; while as for its unearthly citizenry, we need make no such intellectual adjustment to accept demons in Hell or angels in Purgatory as it takes to encounter the Archangel Gabriel without the walls of Tasso's Jerusalem, or a goddess manifest by her gait upon the plains of windy Troy. The out-of-date theology, the bits of Tuscan history, which we must master, merely help to give us our bearings in a new world which we can appropriate and make ourselves at home in, as generation upon generation of cultivated men made themselves at home in the antique world. Such appropriation is one of the rewards of a taste for literature and history.

But these are after all rather acquired pleasures, pleasures of the intellect. The really important thing is that we can throw away our handbooks, ignore the allegory, and, leaving the episodes to interpret themselves, feel sure that we should hark to Farinata from his tomb just as spellbound, that wasted Pia would immortalize herself in her three lines just as surely, that Master Adam would startle us as vividly by his outlandish shape and his double thirst, though Florence and Siena, Montaperti and the Casentino, were but legend, a baseless fabric.

Yet we do not read Dante merely for such episodes, nor merely for the handful of passages of pure lyricism; so without trying to argue with our critic, we may let him suggest a point of view, that of the modern English reader, and try to analyze certain aspects of Dante's poetry which make appeal directly to him. And by the English reader is meant not one who has to read his Dante in translation, but merely one for whom English and not Italian is his mother tongue; and for him, the substance, the matter, the poetic conceptions and ideas, must be the same as for an Italian, since these will even bear transplanting into a different idiom. But can we be certain of appreciating style and manner in a foreign tongue? Style and manner in poetry, according to Matthew Arnold's famous formula, "derive their special character, their accent," from two qualities, "their diction, and, even more,

their movement." What can we hope to feel of diction and movement in Italian verse?

Even if we can dispense with the dark glass of translation, even if we can read our Italian Dante with full-throated ease, we must perhaps resign pretensions to any very deep instinctive feeling for the diction; it is not certain, even though our foreignness yield a rich pleasurable sense of difference, unknown to the Italian, that the essence of beautiful diction does not escape us. We foreigners oftenest acquire our earliest conception of Italian poetic diction from our knowledge of Dante, "The very thing which requires to be proved, naught else, affirms it to us." So while in a thousand lines we imagine we feel that curious felicity of phrasing,—

*La morte prese subitana ed atra,
In mezzo mar siede un paese guasto,—*

yet it is to be doubted whether we can have that intimate certainty of taste which teaches us to prefer "Absent thee from felicity awhile,"—"Perilous seas forlorn,"—and "The dark backward and abysm of time." But with movement in poetry, native or foreign, it is a different question. Whoever reads Italian can respond to that, in Dante or another. The instinct for rhythm goes so deep in human consciousness that there seems to be, in Mrs. Meynell's phrase, a "rhythm of life" itself. It is taught us by the revolutions of the planets, the metronomic beating of our pulses, the periodicity of fever, the makings and lapsings of the tides of the emotions and the tides of the sea. "He who reads for the first time the opening of the *Inferno*," writes an enthusiast in *The London Times*, "is soon aware of a rhythmic power, the energy of which carries the poet on as by a force not his own." The sensitive reader is borne on likewise; he has an almost physical sense of surrender to the current of—

*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita,
Per me si va nella città dolente,
Siede la terra dove nata fui.*

Can we analyze the sorcery of such music, catch the secret laws of this tidal flow and sweep? Perhaps we can find one of them precisely in our handicap, and believe that we owe a part of our æsthetic impressions to the difference in language, before

our direct indebtedness to Dante begins. The very fact that Italian is to us a second language, not the first, necessarily gives us a different æsthetic equipment, we must be fitted to feel certain æsthetic values due to our accidental difference of idiom and ear, certain surprises of sound and accent, that would not stir an Italian. It goes without saying that we must miss certain of his.

The very first attempt at translating a line or two of the *Divina Commedia* into English reveals the simple but important fact that, in a language where subject pronouns are superfluous, and objects make one word with their verbs, and the auxiliaries "shall" and "will" and "do" are unknown, words become fewer and longer than in English. No one who has ever tried verse translation from the Italian needs to be reminded of this difference; his own struggles with sense and metre will have early instructed him that a line of Italian verse can seldom be turned into English without either padding or overflow; the one because a long word must often be rendered by a shorter one, the other because English must carry a quantity of small luggage in the way of pronouns and prepositions which slows up the movement, and makes frequently of a single line a line and a half.

Non adorar debitamente Dio.

Lungamente mostrando paganesmo.

Cotanto gloriosamente accolto.

One of these lines is composed of four words, the other two have but three each, yet to replace those ten Italian words, Longfellow, a poet, at home with words, had to select no less than twenty English ones. The conclusion is not merely that Italian is a difficult language to translate from; it must also be that our English ears, whose unconscious standards of measure were learned from English verse, get a greater effect of resonance and rapidity out of all these sonorous polysyllables.

And Dante's celebrated concision must seem to us even more concise. To take a famous verse from *Purgatorio*:

Guardami ben, ben son, ben son Beatrice.

Guardami, a single word, must be rendered by three, while the rest of the line must be ruined if it is to conform to line-for-line

translation. "In sooth I'm Beatrice," is what Longfellow makes of it, using the heavy, ugly "in sooth" to replace *ben*, while the colloquial "I'm" lays stress upon a pronoun which need not appear at all in Italian. (And if the plural reading be preferred, "In sooth we're Beatrice" is certainly not better.) The dramatic effect of the solemn repetition, the "break in the voice", as someone has called it, of *Ben son, ben son*, is lost entirely. Norton's prose preserves it, with his "I am indeed, I am indeed", but that requires six words, and the rhythm has become prose rhythm.

But the æsthetic effect to English ears of a vocabulary whose units are so much longer as well as fewer, is even greater upon sound than upon sense, and as much more important artistically as music is more necessary to poetry than epigram. Now there can be no doubt that a line full of monosyllables moves more slowly than one in which there is a polysyllable or two; the fall of syllables within a single word must inevitably be lighter and more rapid than if each were a separate word with a separate meaning. That can easily be tested within the boundaries of English:

The murmur of innumerable bees

trips more quickly out of hearing than

Bird of the bitter bright grey golden morn,

yet each line has the like ten syllables, compressed in the first into five words, and in the other spread out over eight.

When it comes to a comparison between English and Italian in this respect, if we distrust our own ear and eye, and hesitate to accept a mere impression that Italian has the more polysyllabic vocabulary, there is a test to be applied more scientific than just the difficulties of the translator. It was suggested by that gifted scholar-poet, Adelaide Crapsey, in her monograph upon English metrics. She had become convinced that it makes a great difference in a poet's metrical effects, whether he makes up the units of his metre prevailingly out of monosyllables or prefers to find them in the natural clusters which long words provide. She accordingly made a number of exact comparisons between certain English poets, on the basis of the number of polysyllables they used, and arranged comparative tables of their ratio to the

total vocabulary. Counting as a polysyllable every word of more than two syllables, she ascertained their percentage in various works of Milton, Tennyson, Swinburne and Francis Thompson. Francis Thompson she found to have the highest, running in *Anthem to Earth* up to 9.39; Milton, in *Paradise Lost*, had 7.95, while Tennyson's highest, in *Ænone*, of the works studied, was only 5.68, and Swinburne's, in *Atalanta in Calydon*, but 4.14. Swinburne, author of that lagging line, "Bird of the bitter bright grey golden morn," falls in *Chastelard* to only 1.57.

These figures afford a background for comparison between the Italian swiftness of movement and some very familiar English standards. If the difference were notable, it would suggest that the English ear receives an intenser impression of sweep and swiftness from Dante's verse than can the Italian, who is listening to his own familiar polysyllabic vocabulary. To make a very limited small experiment on this point, the writer opened the *Commedia* at random at the seventh canto of *Inferno*, and counted that, and the seventh likewise of *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, and found the percentage of polysyllables to the total number of words to be the considerable one of 14.76.

This shows that Dante must have had a natural vocabulary to use which was much richer in long words than English; it says nothing of whether he used its riches consciously for artistic effect. To find anything out about that, he must be compared with other Italian poets. So to satisfy a growing curiosity, one canto each was counted from *Gerusalemme liberata* and *Orlando furioso*, that seventh which chance had first suggested being chosen from each; the percentage in the *Orlando* was found to be 11.4, in the *Gerusalemme*, 10.5. Three of Petrarch's *canzoni*, *Che debb' io far*, *Spirito gentil*, and *Italia mia*, average 9.88, the highest being 10.67. These are much higher than any of Miss Crapsey's percentages for the English poets, but notably lower than Dante's 14 $\frac{3}{4}$. The one who presses him really closely is Leopardi, who in the *Ricordanze* reaches nearly 14 per cent, and in the *Ginestra*, which was so nearly his last work, 14.1.

It seems safe, even on the basis of so limited an assemblage of figures, to hazard several small conclusions: First, that Italian is much richer than English in these long majestic vocables; then,

that Dante's freer use of them gives even to Italian ears a greater effect of sweep and swiftness than they can feel in other Italian poets (except Leopardi); and also, that it seems a just supposition to make of two such artists as Dante and that lover of Dante, Leopardi, that they used the many polysyllables of their mother tongue with intention, that these made one of the strings of a lyre of which two others were rhyme and metre.

Dante cunningly intermingled such vocables, whose many syllables yet fall in a single jet so lightly, with those short, vigorous words of which every language has plenty, then punctuated them with rhymes in that unhurried, overlapping, overtaking pattern of the *terza rima*, which makes all its lovers think of moving water. One critic likens its rhythmic withdrawals and returns to the waves of an incoming tide, and Dante himself says his "bark goes singing", but its movement is rather like the deep steady current of a river, which floats all the varied craft and flotsam of his subject matter—gorgeous water-pageants with set historical tableaux, barges full of happy singing folk, hospital ships of groaning sufferers, now and again a boatload of roughs or a mutilated body, a gondola of lovers, or the mere tedious driftwood of pedantry which evokes no image. But to the reader, the watcher on the bank, the river itself is ever beautiful and interesting, its undertone of ripple always musical.

And the burden of its song is sweet in modern ears. It is forever telling us that man's life is important, that a man's personal life, his character and idiosyncrasies, his moral choices, his prejudices and emotions, his looks, are more interesting than any statistics to be arrived at by averaging many men together, than any conclusions of sociology or psychology about men on the whole. Even his inveterate mediæval love of classification never tempted Dante to classify men. Sins he classified, not sinners. We would not say that the elder Cavalcanti is a typical sceptic, nor Bertran de Born a typical troublemaker, nor Master Adam a typical counterfeiter. Each is a whole human being, natural as life, unique, an epitome somehow of our common human nature seen with one or another facet thrown into the light; each has absolute importance, and is, as a personality should be, an end in himself.

Modern science tends to belittle the individual, to discourage him from imagining himself distinct from anybody else, almost from anything else, in the universe; but Dante conceived of humanity entirely in terms of separate souls. Man was insignificant to him, to be sure, in comparison with God, but important in comparison with the world. The sun itself was set in the heavens to "light him home by every path". To-day it is just the opposite: man questions God, denies or ignores Him, coöperates with Him, or even creates or evolves Him; but in the face of the physical universe he feels humiliated. And if modern science diminishes him, modern psychology bullies him, assures him that his own motives and emotions are not what he thinks they are, interprets his behavior by that of the lower animals, and informs him that he is not even in possession of his own personality, but must always be sharing it with various sub-conscious unknowns, fellow-lodgers in his ego.

How soothing, then, to his self-respect, how refreshing to his tired, over-classified spirit, to turn to that man who was so little capable of being organized that he had to make a party by himself, who tells us that we were not made to live like animals, but to follow virtue and knowledge. It restores our fallen dignity. To read Dante is to resume a personal interest in man, forsaking with a sigh of relief the scientific. And it is the deep-flowing current of the *terza rima*, with this constant, unconscious refrain of the significance and value and interest of the single soul, which offers one answer to the critic, one reason that continually impels the modern English reader back to Dante.

RUTH SHEPARD PHELPS.